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Seymour Hersh Details Explosive Story on Bin Laden Killing & Responds to White House, Media Backlash

Four years after U.S. forces assassinated Osama bin Laden, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter Seymour Hersh has published an explosive piece claiming much of what the Obama administration said about the attack was wrong. Hersh claims at the time of the U.S. raid, bin Laden had been held as a prisoner by Pakistani intelligence since 2006. Top Pakistani military leaders knew about the operation and provided key assistance. Contrary to U.S. claims that it located bin Laden by tracking his courier, a former Pakistani intelligence officer identified bin Laden's whereabouts in return for the bulk of a \$25 million U.S. bounty. Questions are also raised about whether bin Laden was actually buried at sea, as the U.S. claimed. Hersh says instead the Navy SEALs threw parts of bin Laden's body into the Hindu Kush mountains from their helicopter. The White House claims the piece is "riddled with inaccuracies." Hersh joins us to lay out his findings and respond to criticism from government officials and media colleagues.

TRANSCRIPT

AMY GOODMAN: Four years ago this month, President Obama announced U.S. forces had killed Osama bin Laden in a raid on his hideout in Pakistan.

PRES. BARACK OBAMA: At my direction, the United States has launched a targeted operation against that compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A small team of Americans carried out the operation with extraordinary courage and capability. No Americans were harmed. They took care to avoid civilian casualties. After a firefight, they killed Osama Bin Laden and took custody of his body.

AARON MATÉ: But now a new investigation says the official story is a lie. In an explosive report the veteran journalist Seymour Hersh alleges a vast deception on everything from how bin Laden was found to how he was killed. According to Hersh, Pakistan detained bin Laden in 2006 and kept him prisoner with the backing of Saudi Arabia. In 2010 a Pakistani intelligence officer disclosed bin Laden's location to the CIA. Hersh says the U.S. and Pakistan then struck a deal; the U.S. would raid bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad but make it look as if Pakistan was unaware. In fact, Hersh says top Pakistani military leaders provided key help.

AMY GOODMAN: The report also challenges the initial U.S. account of how bin Laden was killed. Hersh says there was never a firefight inside the compound and that bin Laden himself was not armed. Questions are also raised about whether bin Laden was actually buried at sea as the U.S. claimed. Hersh says, instead the Navy SEALs threw parts of bin Laden's body into the Hindu Kush mountains from their helicopter. The White House has rejected Hersh's account of the bin Laden raid. Press Secretary Josh Earnest spoke to reporters on Monday.

JOSH EARNEST: I can tell you that the Obama White House is not the only one to observe that the story is riddled with inaccuracies and outright falsehoods. The former deputy director of the CIA, Mike Morell has said that every sentence was wrong. And Jim, I actually thought one of your colleagues at CNN put it best, Peter Bergen, a security analyst for CNN, described the story as being about 10,000 words in length, and he said, based on reading it, that what is true in the story isn't new and what's new in the story isn't true. So I thought that was a pretty good way of describing why no one here is particularly concerned about it.

AMY GOODMAN: In a statement, White House National Security spokesperson Ned Price said, "There are too many inaccuracies and baseless assertions in this piece to fact check each one... the notion that

the operation that killed Osama Bin Laden was anything but a unilateral U.S. mission is patently false," he said. But despite the White House denials, none of its statements have addressed Hersh's specific allegations. Meanwhile other reporting is beginning to corroborate some key elements. According to *NBC News*, three intelligence sources have backed Hersh's claim that the U.S. heard about bin Laden's location when a Pakistani officer told the CIA. The U.S. has said it helped find bin Laden by tracking his personal courier which Hersh says is a ruse. The *NBC* sources also backed Hersh's contention that the Pakistani government knew all along where bin Laden was hiding. Well, for more we go directly to Seymour Hersh, whose 10,000 word article, "The Killing of Osama bin Laden," appears online at the *London Review of Books*. It's Hersh's latest major investigation in a body of work spanning decades. He won the Pulitzer Prize for exposing the 1968 My Lai Massacre in Vietnam when U.S. forces killed hundreds of civilians. In 2004, Seymour Hersh broke the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. Seymour Hersh, welcome to *Democracy Now!* Why don't you, in your own words, describe what it is that you found?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, you guys did a pretty good job. Basically, you covered the tracks. Basically, I think you can say, simply, that the President, as he said on television, when he announced the raid, did order the raid and the SEAL Team Six, the most elite unit we have in our special forces group, they did conduct a mission. They did kill bin Laden. They did take the body. That's all true, and the rest of it is sort of hoey.

AARON MATÉ: Can we talk about what seems to be the most shocking claim. Pakistan finding in 2006 and the U.S. not finding out until 2010 when you allege a Pakistani officer told the U.S., and meanwhile, Saudi Arabia backing and paying for bin Laden's imprisonment. This seems very improbable, involving hundreds, thousands of officials in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and then the U.S.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Where do you get the notion of hundred or thousand officials? It's, it's — we're talking about a closed society. The White House has a lot of control over the information. The senior Pakistani officials have control over the information. We are talking about a country that went, a dozen, ten years ago through a WMD sort of cover up. The notion that there is some major conspiracy I'm alleging is just sort of — that's over the top. There's no major conspiracy here. It's very easy to control news. We all saw that when the whole thing about the Saddam Hussein and the alleged nuclear weapons. I should think that would be a model for why you might just not be so skeptical of the possibility of holding things. And let me also say, in the piece, it's not so much that I'm saying what happened. I'm quoting sources and of course they're unnamed. You just announced what happened to Jeffrey Sterling today. I mean, what reporter would want to name a source in this administration. You know, bam! He'd be gone. So there you are.

What simply happened is at a certain critical point we had to walk in, we were very angry about it, the United States, Pakistan is our ally. And underneath all of this you have to understand something, which I'm sure you do; just to tell the audience, Pakistan has, what, one, two hundred, maybe more, they're still making — producing enriched uranium, etc., etc. And they have a great deal of nuclear weapons. I would guess they're up to 200 now. It was 100 half a decade ago. And so we have to have comity between the ranking American generals and the ranking Pakistani generals. This is something very important to us. The Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI helps train the people who guard the weapons. We work with Pakistan, and very closely to watch out — literally with them — to monitor the people who are in control of the weapons that make sure nobody is a secret nationalist or a secret jihadist who might grab weapon and do something crazy with it. That's a serious — big issue that's sort of an under — that's behind the whole relationship. We give Pakistan a lot of money through Congress over the table and we give a lot of money to the leadership under the table. So we have a great deal of — and we also understand Pakistan has its own agenda.

And so, '06, they did grab bin Laden. 2010 we learn about it. We're angry. We don't tell the Paks we know right away. We begin looking at Abbottabad where he's located. We start observing him. This has been reported. We set up a team in a nearby house; mostly foreign nationals and Pakistanis who work with us

to monitor the house. We go to the President — the community — intelligence community goes to the President with the information about the walk in. Any guy that wants to sell information for money is automatically suspect, so you have to be careful. The President is appropriately very cautious, very cautious. He's not going to make a move. He doesn't want to end up like Jimmy Carter in a desert, you know, in 1980, you know, that failed attempt to rescue the American hostages which hurt him politically, terribly. It's a year before an election. He's not very popular in America. Not much is going right. He's in a constant fight with Congress, etc., etc., etc.

So we determine the only way we can be sure that we've got the right guy, and this will work, is we have to go to the Pakistanis. So we go to the leadership; General Kayani, who's the head of the army, and General Pasha who's the head of the internal — what they call the ISI, Interservices Intelligence Unit; their counterpart to the CIA. We go to those people. We lay out our case. We make it clear that a lot of goodies are going to be cut off. There's F-16s that are in the pipeline. We're going to slow it down. We're going to slow down congressional money, etc., etc. They have very little option. OK, they start working with us. We set up a four man team in a place called Tarbela Ghazi. These are all details — this is a 10,000 word article. I mean this is a lot of information in this article. We set up a team — none of which the White House is responding to and senators say — they keep on saying, it's so many falsehoods we can't correct it. And by the way, the last time I — quoting Peter Bergen — I don't know the guy, I'm sure he believes what he believes, but the last time the White House actually quoted a reporter in the way they did would have been Dick Cheney quoting a story by Judy Miller and Mike Gordon in *The New York Times* at the height of the WMD crisis about the tubes that allegedly could be used for making — delivering nuclear weapons. A story that they had planted in the *New York Times* and then Cheney and *60 Minutes* goes and uses that story as a — to buttress the argument. We know that. That seems to me to really — just get on with it White House. Just start denying specifics.

Four man team in Ghazi, Ghazi Tarbela, a very important base in Pakistan. A lot of black operations are run with us and the Pakistanis out of it. It's not that well known. There's an airbase there, but there's also a covert unit. The Pakistanis also train most of the guards who monitor and watch over the nuclear weapons there. So it's a — we're there. We're getting — our team is collecting data on the place in Abbottabad where bin Laden — you can call him a prisoner under the supervision that there were steel doors leading to his apartment that were locked. He was on the third floor of this complex there. There were a number of buildings in the compound. And we have great detail. We're learning how thick the steel is, how much dynamite you need to blow it, how many steps are going, who else is there. This is all being passed by the Pakistanis to us.

The whole game and the whole crux of the story I'm writing is that nothing was supposed to be made public after the raid. The SEALs were supposed to go in — and you have to understand we're talking about two Black Hawks full of SEALs, packed to the brim. The SEALs are basically better off with 8-10 people, and they had 12 in each of them. They were — the plane was stripped down. They were coming in heavy. And 24 SEALs going into a compound where, presumably, if it was the secret raid there would be somebody with arms. Certainly, if Pakistan itself wasn't guarding it with armed people, bin Laden would have armed guards because a man that a lot of people would want to get to. They're going in just repelling down was the plan. You know, a perfect target for anybody with a BB gun. And they're going to go in like that without any air cover. It's a story that it is — and bin Laden, the most hunted man in the world at that time since 2001. He was number one international terrorist. He's going to hide out in a compound at Abbottabad, sort of a resort town, and a resort town 48 miles or so outside of Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, within a mile or two of Pakistan's West Point where they train young officers, the army does, and a couple of miles from a regimental headquarters full of army troops. He's going to hide out there? I mean, As I wrote in the article, it's a Lewis Carroll story. It just doesn't sustain any credibility if you look at it objectively.

And so the deal was it was not to be announced. We were going to go kill the guy. That was, of course, the mission. That's why the President had to talk about a firefight. There was not firefight. They've actually acknowledged that within a few days of the raid; the White House did. Bin Laden did not have an AK and

wasn't being — cowering behind some woman as was initially said. There was — the point being that, as I write very carefully in this article — seven to ten days after the body — the killing was done and the body was taken away, we were going to announce — the White House — the President, himself, was going to announce that a drone raid somewhere in the Hindu Kush mountain area, you know, the Waziristan — that's not clear, it was going to be vague as to whether it — that's the area that divides Pakistan and Afghanistan mountain area — it was going to be vague as to which country this took place in. Somewhere in that border area a drone raid hit a building. We sent in a team to look at it. There was a tall guy that looked like bin Laden. We took some pictures, some DNA — my god, we got him. That was the announcement. That protects everybody. Pasha and Kayani are working with us and nobody has to know it. Why are they worried about being told?

At one point in the last six or seven years, eight percent — that's the popularity of America in Pakistan, was eight percent — bin Laden was hugely popular. If it was known to the public that Pasha and Kayani, the two leading generals that worked with us to kill the guy, they would be in real trouble. They'd have to move to Dubai or have armed guards.

So once the president did it — this is done without notice. And I'm — of course, as the — you quoted some officer saying it was unilateral. It was all American, yes, Pakistanis were not involved in a raid, our SEALs were. And so, I wish, as you said in the intro, Amy, the denials are all sort of non-denials.

AMY GOODMAN: Well before we get to the denials, with your sequence of events, you say they killed him, Obama didn't plan to announce it right away. What happened? And what happened to Osama bin Laden's body according to your account?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yes. You have to understand this is caveated in my article. What I said was that the SEALs initially reported that — first they put a lot more bullets in it than has been publicly said; not in the head but in the body. There were six SEALs. SEALs work — SEALs are funny. They work in teams of six because that's how many fit into a dinghy. Although, god knows, since this war began, The War on Terror, the American SEALs don't go into the water very much, which is a source of great annoyance to them. They're no longer water people they're just regular ground guys. The issue accounts, and I do have access to people who had access to it — I'm sorry I have these sources, I just do. And I'm sorry other reporters don't, but I just do and that's just the way it is. And they did talk about throwing out parts of the body over the Hindu Kush mountains from the chopper because it was shot up pretty badly. The head was in tact.

Any way. And by the way, if you think about the sequence that I'm telling you, that you're going to find another bin Laden somewhere, you don't need the body. The only reason they took the body, the needed to take the body, is because the Pakistanis wanted it out of there. They didn't want anybody to know anything about this. And we just followed their orders. And so what happened is that night — you know, it's funny, I remember this vividly. Around nine o'clock, I think it was *CNN* or somebody began to report at, on the night that the raid was announced, the night of the raid, after it's success, there was reports that something had happened to bin Laden; something was coming very quickly. Two and a half hour debate. Two and a half hours of, as I understand, the debate was simply with a lot of people around Obama saying you cannot trust this story to be kept for seven to ten days. Among other things, the Secretary of Defense, Bob Gates, who had been very critical of the plan, very, very critical, as he wrote in his memoir, very upset about what happened, he might start talking, somebody might start talking, they'd start blabbing and you lose the edge Mr. President. This is re-election time and presidents do strange things before re-elections; often strange things. We know that.

And so Obama delivered a speech that was written by his political people and not cleared by the national security team. It was a speech with — I can't begin to tell you Obama's state of mind. As far as I know, he got a speech, he believed everything he read. He was — you know, he's getting briefings, he believed what he was read. I'm not accusing him of lying, but what happened, what was said was a lie. And in the speech he laid down the foundation for an enormous scramble over the next weeks — the next days and weeks they had to recreate a new story. He said, as you said in the introduction, there was a firefight and

Obama was — bin Laden was killed in it. That's to cover the idea that it's an out and out murder. And he said also, in the fight, he said also a treasure trove of material was recovered. We have yet to see it and I raise a lot of questions about what was covered, what was collected.

At one point the SEALs were said to have taken 15 computers out of there. But if you read everything that was written, it also was written and said many times there was no internet connection in Abbottabad. There was no sign of any operational capability of bin Laden at all. And one of the problems with the — protecting the walk in, when you — you had to protect the walk in — one of the reasons you didn't want to talk about a walk in is you don't do that. And so we had to protect that —

AMY GOODMAN: You mean the guy who revealed to the U.S. — walking into the U.S Embassy.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yeah, they call him a walk in. And the President actually said in his speech, we had a lead — he said in Aug — we had a lead in August of 2010, which, really, for a lot of people in the intelligence community, that was too close to the mark. A lead means something something specific happened then. And that's when the walk in went to see a guy named Jonathan Banks, the station chief, a very competent guy from everything I hear; the station chief for the CIA in Islamabad. And they — we had to call in — lie detector people from Washington had to fly in to debrief the guy and conclude he was telling the truth. It was a big piece of evidence. Anyway. But you have to get around that story so you create the courier story, that the CIA with brilliant work — and initially they wanted to say through enhanced interrogation — found out about a courier who led them to bin Laden. That is such a — that is really an outrageous story and they sold it to a movie called, "No Easy —," no what was it —

AMY GOODMAN: "Zero Dark Thirty"?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Zero Dark — Zero Dark — that was the thesis of the movie. It also included the torture element. Absolutely not so. What happened is we had a guy walk in. *NBC* — *NBC*, last night about six o' clock, put out that story saying it, and you hardly saw it today. There was a piece I read in *The New York Times* this morning that didn't deign to mention that independent network had confirmed one of the major elements. Not only a walk in, but it raises questions about the couriers that they talk so much about. And so —

AMY GOODMAN: Sy — go ahead.

SEYMOUR HERSH: — it's not — Let me just say this; here's my theory about this. You know, there's been a — in Europe and the rest of the world they're more open minded, more willing to say, oh, terrible things happen. In America, I think, one of the problems with the press, and this is just a heuristic thinking — there's nothing empirical about what I'm saying — I think one of the things that's got them so agitated — people were writing stories accusing me a plagiarism in the press in the last two days. You know, *Politico*, which does great stuff, has a blog in which they said this sort of wacky stuff. A 10,000 word article that's plagiarized? Anyway, I think there's a sense that everybody bought into the story. Everybody bought into the story after 9/11. The White House had it going. They had the press begging for more information. Briefings were given. The stories initially had, if you remember the initial stories, they had bin laden ready with an AK and they were shooting in the doorway, etc. The only firing that came across in the first wave of after action reports was a stray bullet apparently hit a woman in the leg who was screaming, either before or after the bullet hit her, I don't know. But there was no murder in the — there was no killing of people in the courtyard. If there had been a gun in the courtyard, if anybody's had a gun in the courtyard it was cleared by the intelligence — Pakistani intelligence cleared all of the guards out before the SEALs landed. If anybody had a gun in the courtyard, the SEALs wouldn't have gone near the courtyard the way it did, just flying in, you know, like in a World War II movie.

AMY GOODMAN: Sy, we have to break, but we're going to come back to this discussion.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Sure.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist. His latest piece in the *London Review of Books* is headlined, "The Killing of Osama bin Laden," appears. It tells a very different story than the one we were told in the United States by President Obama. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman with Aaron Maté. Our guest is Seymour Hersh, the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist who just published piece in the London review of books called, "The Killing of Osama bin Laden." It tells a very different story than President Obama told the United States after Obama — after Osama bin Laden was killed.

AARON MATÉ: This morning on *CNN*, Philip Mudd, *CNN's* counterterrorism analyst discussed Sy Hersh's reporting.

PHILIP MUDD: The assertion is not that somebody down the chain in the Pakistani military or security services might have known something. The assertion is that senior Pakistani generals, including the head of the security service knew for years. So, while that security service was losing officers in the fight against al-Qaida, there were also, at the same time, secretly sheltering the head of al-Qaida. I mean, let me break some news for you this morning: aliens abducted President Obama 15 minutes ago and Darth Vader is in the Oval Office making decisions for the United States. I have a secret source who told me that, why don't we publish. This is nonsense. This is just ridiculous.

AARON MATÉ: That's Philip Mudd of *CNN*. Sy Hersh, do you want to respond to that? Darth Vader in the White House.

SEYMOUR HERSH: No, of course not. I don't care.

AARON MATÉ: OK, let me ask —

SEYMOUR HERSH: I mean, look, that's childish. The reality is the Pakistanis told — there were meetings between the head of the Pakistani intelligence service, General Pasha, and Leon Panetta, that I write about. And I write about them based on, well you have to read the article to find out. The — I write about them very carefully. One of the questions always asked is, why did you do this to us? And particular, why bring in the Saudis. What happened is the Pakistanis, as some of you may know are very close with Saudi Arabia. There's always been a chronic fear that the great Islamic bomb — at some point Pakistan might even give the Saudis a bomb. That's been written about constantly. That's a great concern. We really have a serious concern about maintaining great relations with — they're very good right now with us and the Pakistani military. Anyway.

And so the answer that was given, I'll just tell you exactly what it was. The way they explained it was, first of all, the — they went to — they told the Saudis and the Saudis immediately said, do not tell the Americans about him. Why? And I can only give you the obvious reason that was given, because the last thing the Saudi Arabia wants is the United States to be — the begin interrogating Osama bin Laden and discover who might have been giving him money, which sheikh, where, in Saudi Arabia in 2001 and 2002, and before or even after. That's not completely illogical.

The second reason, of course, is, once the Pakistanis have bin Laden, they have leverage. They can let both the Taliban, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, know that they have him. They can let the jihadists in both countries also know that they have him. And they get leverage. They can make it clear to both those groups you have to talk to us more than you do. We want to know more about what's going on or we'll string this guy up. That's all — that was the explanation given. Nobody liked it, but there was an understanding that Pakistan has its own point of view about the world and it isn't only the same as ours. So we accepted it. We had not much choice, we wanted their help.

But — so it's not a case Darth Vader and sort of silly talk like that. This is serious stuff I'm talking about. This is the President of the United States, if not knowing the wrong information was given, certainly countenancing it, in fact triggering a whole sequence of lies that had to be — a whole story that had to be recreated. And nobody is talking about what I wrote about, this poor Dr. Afridi, the one that's now in jail on charges — he was convicted of treason, reviewed and now in jail on charges of murder for 33 years or something like that. This is the guy that was going around in — providing vaccinations for various kinds of illnesses; hepatitis, I think among them. I don't think it was polio, but he was providing that kind of service to the community. A physician, and he was also an asset of the CIA, and we were so worried, in America, that the story about — we got DNA via the Pakistanis before the end of — before 2010.

You needed DNA. You needed the Pakistanis to get into Abbottabad, to get into — to take some DNA from bin Laden — we had other samples from his family — and make sure — the President wanted to know that was really bin Laden. And so a doctor — a Pakistani doctor had — was assigned to — his name was [Aziz]. Amir [Aziz] was assigned to move next door to the house in Abbottabad. In fact, journalists, after the raid, found his name in Urdu on a doorplate in one of the houses next to it. They to protect Aziz and so they created a story, the CIA in their wisdom, that Afridi was the one that went in and tried to get into the compound to take, unsuccessfully, to take — to get a DNA sample from bin Laden, which, of course, led to a huge outcry against the idea that the Western intelligence media, the CIA and the Brits also often criticized for the same way, are behind some of the vaccination programs. This is a belief that certainly prevalent in Africa. And we've had tremendously adverse consequences for the health of —

AMY GOODMAN: Sy, we have ten seconds.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well the implications for the health, the well being of a lot of people, are pretty negative from this — a very dumb move by the CIA. These are all things to be considered. It's not a Darth Vader moment. I'm sorry to say.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, we want to thank you for being with us, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist in Washington, D.C. We'll link to your piece in the *London Review of Books* called "The Killing of Osama bin Laden." Coming up, CIA whistleblower, Jeffrey Sterling is sentenced to three and a half years in jail. We'll air an exclusive interview with him. This marks the first time the public has heard his voice since he was arrested four years ago. Stay with us. ■